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PP RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHHM RUEHPB
DE RUEHBD #0301/01 2820651
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FM AMEMBASSY BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3976
INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS PRIORITY
RUCNARF/ASEAN REGIONAL FORUM COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 0119
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 06 BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN 000301

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/09/2032
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [BX](#)
SUBJECT: THE SULTAN OF BRUNEI, FORTY YEARS ON

Classified By: AMBASSADOR EMIL SKODON FOR REASONS 1.5 (B,D)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Sultan Haji Hassanal Bolkiah, the world's third-longest reigning monarch, marks his fortieth anniversary on the throne as the most popular and respected public figure in Brunei. As an absolute monarch, Sultan Hassanal's authority is unquestioned and even minor matters are directed to him for decision. Despite his ubiquitously displayed portrait and obsequious glorification in the local media, the Sultan's common touch and accessibility have prevented the development of an oppressive cult of personality. While careful to preserve the elaborate formal trappings and protocol of royal institutions, he is by nature relaxed and approachable, if somewhat introverted, and has been remarkably effective in projecting a public image as a ruler who cares about the welfare of his people. There is no credible domestic threat to his rule.

¶2. (C) Sultan Hassanal may be an absolute monarch but he is not a despot. His private adventurousness -- piloting his own jet, taking a second wife 32 years his junior -- contrasts with his political style as a risk-averse consensus-seeker who follows public opinion as much as he shapes it. He is particularly sensitive to the views of Brunei's conservative Muslim clerics. Although he does not necessarily push for greater Islamic rigor, neither will he readily push against it. The centralization of power in his cautious hands and ongoing deference to the clerical establishment has produced slow and stultifying decision-making, and a resistance to change. Partly as a result, Brunei's economic growth and political reform have lagged behind other Southeast Asian countries. Although the Sultan has pursued gradual reform through revival of an advisory Legislative Council, he has no intention of surrendering any real authority, and his underlying aim continues to be the preservation of the monarchy and its monopoly on power.

¶3. (C) The Sultan views radical Islamic terrorism as the most dangerous potential threat to his rule. To guarantee the regime's security, he continues to underwrite a battalion of British Army Gurkhas in Brunei. The goals of Brunei's foreign policy under Sultan Hassanal have been typical of a small state: avoidance of open conflicts with neighboring countries; maintenance of a regional balance among global powers; reliance on multilateral institutions; and, opposition to the use of force. More recently, a growing and at times emotional identification with global Islam has entered the mix. Sultan Hassanal avidly supports U.S. engagement in Southeast Asia and recognizes our shared

interest in combating terrorism, but exercises caution when it comes to issues that have overtones of a conflict between Islam and "the West." His health is excellent and there is no compelling reason for him to hand the throne to his eldest son, but even if he does he will still pull the strings from behind the scenes. That will mean a continuation of general Bruneian support for U.S. security and counterterrorism policies in East Asia, but only selected cooperation on policy issues beyond the region and lip service, at best, for political reform. END SUMMARY.

STILL GOING STRONG AFTER FORTY YEARS

14. (U) On October 5 Sir Haji Hassanah Bolkuah, the Sultan and Yang Di-Pertuan (Supreme Ruler) of Brunei, marked the fortieth anniversary of his 1967 accession to the throne following his father's abdication (his formal coronation did not take place until August 1 of the following year). He is the world's third longest reigning monarch of a sovereign and independent state after King Bhumibol of Thailand and Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom, and one of the few who can still be considered an absolute ruler. Brunei's official royal genealogy places him as the 29th member of his family to rule Brunei since the beginning of the Sultanate in the mid-14th century.

15. (SBU) To all outward appearances, Sultan Hassanah is entering his fifth decade of rule in a more secure position than ever before. He is by far the most respected and popular individual in Brunei. A senior official of one of

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Brunei's nascent opposition parties joked to Ambassador that his dream scenario was for the Sultan to decree democratic elections, abdicate his throne, and then run as candidate for Prime Minister on the party's ticket, since he would be sure to get nearly 100 percent of the vote in any free ballot. The longevity of his reign, plus the fact that he is the only ruler Brunei has known since it regained full independence from Great Britain in 1984, has made Sultan Hassanah into a father figure for many of his subjects. According to the Ministry of Development, 77 percent of Bruneians are below 40 years of age, and thus have known no other ruler.

PUBLIC IMAGE: ABSOLUTE RULER WITH THE COMMON TOUCH

16. (SBU) The palace propaganda and protocol machines work hard to portray the Sultan as all-wise and all-powerful. This leads to anachronisms like the mandatory attendance by prominent citizens, including government officials down to Deputy Permanent Secretary level, at formal ceremonies presided over by the Sultan, such as prize awards for Koran-reading competitions or the conferral of new noble titles. These events may paralyze government decision-making for several hours, but they make for effective theater. Television images of the leading figures in Bruneian society gazing up reverently at the Sultan on his throne-like chair -- usually gilded and always upholstered in the royal color of bright yellow -- reinforce his image of ultimate authority.

17. (SBU) This omnipotent image is tempered with a "common touch" that is partly genuine, partly manufactured. Sultan Hassanah makes a point of not appearing to be isolated from his people. The media often show him on "working" or "surprise" visits to schools, government departments, or outlying villages, where the casually-dressed and soft-spoken monarch appears to enjoy mixing with his subjects and shows a genuine interest in their work and their lives. This is also the opportunity for Bruneians looking for a favor or a shortcut through the bureaucracy to employ the "white envelope" tactic, and hand directly to the Sultan a note requesting his help; these are later reviewed by palace staff

and referred to the appropriate government department for action. Those who do not encounter the monarch when he makes such visits can still shake his hand and exchange a few words during the post-Ramadan Hari Raya holiday when the Sultan throws open the doors of the palace reception rooms and personally greets every one of the tens of thousands of male guests who come to call (women are greeted separately by his queens).

¶8. (SBU) Although it is unclear what percentage of Brunei's copious oil revenues are available for the Sultan to spend on personal pursuits, he undoubtedly remains one of the world's wealthiest individuals, yet takes care not to flaunt that wealth before his subjects. It is not uncommon for them to see their monarch relax by taking a daily drive from his 1788-room palace to the tree-lined streets of Jerudong Park several miles away, not in one of the dozens of exotic sports cars or chauffeur-driven Rolls Royces that he owns, but rather behind the wheel of his unassuming black Mercedes SUV, accompanied only by two motorcycle escorts in the lead and one follow car. Even though other drivers are required to pull over and stop when the Sultan drives by, these excursions still contribute to his image as a down-to-earth ruler, even when they go wrong. Earlier this year, when one of his motorcycle escorts was involved in a traffic accident and his convoy came to a screeching halt, His Majesty personally flagged down an astonished couple who happened to be driving by in their old Toyota and hitched a ride back to his palace, a fact duly reported in the next day's press.

PERSONAL LIFE: CONTENTMENT IN A GILDED CAGE

¶9. (C) The 61-year-old Sultan remains fit, healthy, and by all appearances content with his personal life. His rumored youthful excesses with alcohol, gambling, and extramarital affairs are things of the past, although his adventurous streak remains. He is an accomplished pilot who continues to enjoy flying the aircraft of "The Sultan's Flight" that are reserved for his use, including a Boeing 747, as well as his own Blackhawk helicopter. The Sultan's polo-playing days appear to be over, but he continues to enjoy horseback riding. His remarkable slimness -- even up close, he does

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not appear to have an ounce of excess body fat -- attests to his faithful adherence to an exercise regime. On the other hand, the Sultan's physical fitness is often exaggerated by Brunei's fawning media. Although the media reported admiringly on a hike the Sultan led through steep forest trails last year to promote physical fitness, a source who was present told us the cameras were switched off when His Majesty stumbled or began panting from exertion.

¶10. (C) Rumor has it that in 2005 the Sultan decided to marry his current second wife, then a 26-year-old Malaysian newscaster and now Her Royal Highness Princess Azrinaz, after his religious advisors recognized that he was smitten and advised that it was acceptable to act on his ardor so long as he made an honest woman of her. In any case, the marriage has worked. Almost precisely nine months after the nuptials, HRH Princess Azrinaz gave birth to a son, the Sultan's fifth (he also has six daughters). Even Raja Isteri (Queen) Saleha, the Sultan's first cousin and wife since an arranged marriage in 1965, has apparently reconciled herself to her new family situation after some initial unhappiness. In the past several months, she and Princess Azrinaz have frequently made joint public appearances and appear to act tolerably cordially toward each other. (The Sultan remains divorced from another wife, Mariam, to whom he was married from 1982 to 2003, although his sons by that marriage live with him and appear at official events. There are also recurring but unverified rumors that Sultan Hassanah has long-term mistresses ensconced in neighboring countries.)

¶11. (C) Despite the careful cultivation of his image as a man of the people, Sultan Bolkiah and his immediate family have become more withdrawn into the palace cocoon. Three decades ago, they could be seen at social events in the homes of senior government officials, foreign diplomats, or other expatriates. Today, that is unheard of. The circle of friends with which His Majesty truly relaxes appears increasingly limited to his immediate family, a very few long-time Bruneian acquaintances, and some members of other royal families, most notably the Jordanian. When he does meet others from outside that circle, especially in larger groups or more formal events, the soft-spoken Sultan comes across as guarded and almost shy. In small groups or one-on-one conversations, however, he can be relaxed, outgoing, and self-assured. Although the Sultan has a good sense of humor and a ready smile, he maintains a serious demeanor when addressing serious issues, and knows how to politely but firmly use body language and a stern facial expression to communicate disapproval of another's comments or his own desire to drop a specific issue.

DOMESTIC POLITICS: ALL POWER TO THE SULTAN

¶12. (C) Centralization of power has been a distinguishing feature of Sultan Hassanah's long reign. Biannually for the past four decades he has renewed the state of emergency declared by his father following a failed 1962 uprising, which allows him to govern by fiat and without restraint. He has largely neutered the ancient institutions that allowed the Bruneian nobility to exert a moderating influence on the monarch's power; the five posts of "wazir," traditionally the most senior advisors to Brunei's monarch, are now either vacant or filled by the Sultan's brothers. In an attempt to build a more transparent and enduring mechanism of government, and to improve Brunei's image to the outside world, in 2004 he reestablished an appointed Legislative Council and announced that direct elections to the Council would be considered at some indeterminate future point. Since then, however, he has repeatedly emphasized that the Council is expected to play only an advisory role. In 2004 he had Brunei's constitution amended to clarify his preeminent power, including via a clause stating &His Majesty the Sultan and Yang Di-Pertuan can do no wrong in either his personal or any official capacity.8

¶13. (C) Sultan Hassanah has also managed to end, or at least contain, traditional rivalries within Brunei's royal family. His first marriage to his cousin was arranged to mollify her branch of the family, which had its own tentative claims to the throne, and despite two subsequent marriages he has been careful to preserve her protocol supremacy to keep the peace with her relatives. Any thought of usurpation by one of his three brothers has receded to the point where it would be well nigh unthinkable: Sufri, afflicted with disfiguring

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benign facial tumors, has never been a political force; Jefri, who squandered multiple billions as Finance Minister in the 1990's and whom the Brunei Government eventually sued for recovery of its assets, probably lost his last chance at reconciliation by trying to renege on his agreement to return those assets and appears resigned to a life of luxurious exile in London and Las Vegas; and Mohamed, the oldest and most intellectual of the Sultan's brothers and Foreign Minister since independence, will probably not put at risk the extensive business empire he has been allowed to build for himself and his children.

A CONSENSUAL, RISK-AVERSE MICRO-MANAGER

¶14. (C) One by-product of this centralization of authority is a stultifying concentration of decision-making in Sultan

Bolkiah's hands, often for minutiae that could easily be delegated. For example, scholarships for each of the hundreds of students that go abroad annually for government-funded studies must be personally approved by His Majesty, and mid- and senior-level civil servants cannot travel overseas without his prior permission. Most of the time (but not always) these approvals are routine, but until they are granted all relevant planning including visa applications is put on hold. This extreme concentration of power feeds on itself as both the result and continuing cause of the Sultan's aura of omnipotence. Not surprisingly, it also discourages lower ranks of the government from assuming any responsibility and slows decision-making to a crawl while issues slowly rise through layers of bureaucracy to the Sultan's desk.

¶15. (C) Even as he monopolizes authority over small matters, Sultan Hassanal avoids decisions on major issues unless there is consensus among senior advisers. This style stems partly from cultural norms, and was accentuated by his formative experience as ruler of a UK protectorate who had to balance the views of the British with those of his strong-willed father, who tried to pull strings from behind the scenes after abdication. The emphasis on consensus contributes to political stability but also gives veto power to every cabinet member, even the most conservative, and inevitably results in lost opportunities. Reliable sources told us that a recent cabinet discussion on allocating a portion of Brunei's gas output to a proposed industrial project ended with a vote of 12 in favor and 2 opposed. The Sultan refused to green-light the proposal on that basis, and instead told his ministers to reach a consensus and bring it back to him for approval. The resulting delay may cause this project to suffer the same fate as a proposed elastomers plant, which Brunei lost to an Arabian Gulf competitor because the German investors grew tired of waiting for a decision.

GROWING DEFERENCE TO CONSERVATIVE ISLAMIC CLERICS

¶16. (C) Nowhere is the Sultan's reluctance to rock the boat more apparent than in his deferential dealings with the Islamic clerical establishment. This is partly due to his growing personal religiosity, which some observers date from his 1987 Haj pilgrimage to Mecca. Others trace it to the assistance in kicking (or at least controlling) a compulsive gambling habit that he received from Islamic clerics in the 1980's. Whatever the cause, something changed. In 1985, Sultan Hassanal refused to participate in the annual procession through downtown Bandar Seri Begawan marking the birthday of the Prophet Mohamed because religious authorities declared the formerly mixed-gender event should be male-only.

But by 1990, he proclaimed the national philosophy of a "Malay Islamic Monarchy" to be "God's Will," thereby cementing Islam's place at the center of Bruneian life and ceding to it a nearly co-equal role with the monarchy.

¶17. (C) As the Islamic revival in Southeast Asia that began in the 1980's has spread, the Sultan's risk-averse nature makes him less likely to go against public sentiment by opposing the clerics. He will not necessarily push for Islamic rigor, but neither will he push against it. The classic case occurred in 1991, when the State Mufti convinced one of the Sultan's brothers to approve a ban on alcohol sales while the Sultan was overseas. Sultan Hassanal was reportedly furious, but decided he could not appear to be "un-Islamic" by overturning the edict, which remains in force

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to this day. In the years since, conservative Islamic norms have become even more pervasive. Several women in the Sultan's family who used to appear regularly without their heads covered, including the Raja Isteri, are now never seen without the "tudong" that completely hides their hair.

SECURITY POLICY: DIAL 911 FOR THE GURKHAS

¶18. (C) Although there is a lingering concern that Big Brother Malaysia may one day try to absorb Brunei, the Sultan's close advisors have confirmed to us that he sees radical Islamic terrorism as the primary potential threat to his regime. He has put in place measures to ensure that radical Islam does not take hold domestically: mosques are tightly controlled (all sermons are written in the Ministry of Religious Affairs); internal security services rigorously enforce the law that only the Shaaafi Sect of Sunni Islam may be practiced publicly; and, aspiring Islamic scholars are sent to study only at traditionally "safe" institutions such as Al-Azhar in Egypt, the International Islamic University in Kuala Lumpur, and, beginning this year, a new Islamic university in Brunei.

¶19. (C) Sultan Hassanal is well aware that even these strict measures cannot guarantee that the seeds of radicalism will not grow within a young Bruneian population that complains of boredom and the unavailability of challenging jobs, let alone the guest workers who make up approximately one quarter of Brunei's resident population. The need for a reliable bulwark against this or any other threat has led him to continue relying on a foreign force as the ultimate guarantor of his sovereignty: a battalion of British Army Royal Gurkha Rifles, related garrison personnel, and a UK jungle warfare school used by the SAS and others. This makes Brunei home to the UK's third largest contingent of overseas-based forces, after Germany and Cyprus.

¶20. (C/NF) The agreement governing the presence of these British troops states they will be available for defense of the Bruneian government upon the Sultan's request. This arrangement is not publicized, but when discussing it privately Bruneians usually justify it by pointing to the close ties with the UK and the Anglophile attitude of the Sultan and his subjects (he attended Sandhurst and maintains a home in London). What goes unmentioned is that the Sultan has quietly committed his government to pay the ongoing cost of the UK military presence, which we understand will soon approach 60 million pounds (approximately USDOLS 140 million) per year, plus one-time capital costs for upgrading barracks. Lest there be any doubt that this payment is motivated by a desire to keep a 911 force on hand, the confidential terms of the agreement provide the Sultan with a rebate when the Gurkhas are deployed outside of Brunei, as they recently have been to Afghanistan. (The Sultan also maintains a separate force of retired Gurkhas who provide security for the royal family and oil installations.)

FOREIGN POLICY: STRATEGIC INTERESTS, PERSONALITIES,
AND ISLAMIC SOLIDARITY

¶21. (C) Sultan Hassanal's foreign policy has been typical for a small state preoccupied with its own survival, and colored by his cautious nature. He has done his best to dodge open conflict with more powerful neighbors, even when some Bruneians grumble that he should be more assertive when, for example, negotiating with Malaysia over competing territorial claims. He consistently opposes the use of force to solve international disputes and embraces "further negotiations" as his default position -- he opposed both the 1991 and 2003 wars with Iraq -- and is an ardent supporter of multilateral organizations in which small states have an equal seat at the table (Brunei conforms closely to ASEAN consensus positions, and the Sultan himself is the only APEC leader to have attended all 15 APEC Leaders Meetings). Sultan Hassanal views the maintenance of a balance among major powers as essential for regional stability, and seldom misses an opportunity to emphasize to USG interlocutors his desire to see the U.S. remain deeply engaged in Southeast Asia.

122. (C) Brunei's foreign relations are also influenced by the Sultan's personal experiences. Its close ties with

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Singapore, which is allowed to operate its own military training area in the Bruneian jungle, derives in part from his father's close personal friendship with Lee Kuan Yew. His ardor for the UK, or at least its defense firms, has been tempered by a contentious long-running dispute over fulfillment of a contract for BAE to construct three Offshore Patrol Vessels for the Bruneian Navy, signed in 1995 following strong pressure from the then-UK government. (Under terms of a recent out-of-court settlement, Brunei will take possession of the ships and resell them at a huge loss.) Although Sultan Hassanal's relations with the U.S. have been bolstered by his personal rapport with Presidents Clinton and Bush, he has been wary of too close dealings with the USG since being embarrassed by public revelations that a covert USDOLS 10 million contribution he made to the Nicaraguan Contras in 1986 at USG request went missing because an incorrect Swiss bank account number was provided for the funds transfer.

123. (C) A sense of solidarity with the global community of Islam plays a growing role in Sultan Hassanal's foreign policy. As is the case in many Muslim majority countries, and despite our vigorous public diplomacy efforts to argue otherwise, there is a popular perception in Brunei that the U.S.-led Global War on Terror has morphed into a Global War on Islam. This sense of Islamic victimization has led to increased sympathy for fellow Muslims living under dire circumstances, particularly in the Middle East, and reaches right to the top. Sultan Hassanal took his own government by complete surprise while attending an August 2006 emergency OIC meeting when, apparently overcome by sympathy for what he perceived as innocent Muslim victims of Israel's incursion into Lebanon, he announced that Brunei would contribute significant forces to a peacekeeping force for southern Lebanon. Although that contribution has yet to materialize due to cold feet within the Sultan's government, we cannot rule out similarly impetuous and emotional decisions in the future when it comes to issues related to global Islamic solidarity.

OUTLOOK AND IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. INTERESTS

124. (C) Before almost every important ceremonial date related to Sultan Hassanal's reign, rumors abound that he will announce his intention to follow in his father's footsteps and abdicate in favor of his son. The 40th anniversary of his rule is no exception. We discount those rumors, however, based in part on the knowledge that the Sultan is discussing several official visits to foreign countries in the coming year. Even if he does hand the reins to the Crown Prince, however, Sultan Hassanal will continue to call the shots from behind the scenes. Despite having been long groomed for the role of monarch, the Crown Prince is generally not considered to have yet developed the same intellectual or leadership qualities as his father. We have, for example, found that he refuses to engage in substantive discussions on foreign policy, probably due to a lack of self-confidence. Under these circumstances, it is likely that both the Crown Prince and the nation will welcome a continuing policy role for Sultan Hassanal.

125. (C) On balance, that is welcome news. We can expect Sultan Hassanal to continue as a strong supporter of U.S. engagement in East Asia and an advocate for APEC, and eventually make good his intention to contribute more troops to multilateral peacekeeping operations. He will be a passive supporter in the fight against regional terrorism; with a sustained diplomatic effort, we may even be able to build a more active counterterrorism partnership, despite the wariness about cooperation in sensitive operations that

lingers from his 1986 experience with the Contras. On the negative side of the ledger, there is nothing in the Sultan's track record that leads us to believe he will be a supporter of genuine democratic reform, whatever lip service he may pay. There is also a risk that the Sultan will feel it necessary to distance himself from the USG if events in the Middle East are perceived to develop in ways unfavorable to the Islamic "ummah." Barring that, however, Sultan Hassanali is likely to continue as a moderate and cautious Islamic leader who sees a strategic relationship with the USG within his region as very much in his own interest, but who offers only selected support for our foreign policy interests further afield.

FRIEDMAN